

X-Priority: 2 (High)  
Date: Tue, 5 Dec 2000 17:46:33 -0800  
To: Harold Varmus <varmus@mskcc.org>  
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>  
Subject: follow-up letter

Hi Harold,

I'm about to send off a revised version of the letter you drafted to recruit the "leadership group". So far, we have you, me, Matt Scott, Mike Eisen and Rich Roberts signed on. I made a few edits to the letter that I want to run by you before sending it off over your signature. I'm happy to defer to your judgement, although I would be inclined to leave out the appendix, and respond to any of the issues it addresses on an as-needed basis (I tend to defer looking at long emails when I'm busy, as most of these folks are likely to be). Please give me your feedback as soon as you can, and I'll then send it right off (or you can if you'd prefer).

Here's the mailing list I plan to use:

Michael Ashburner  
Elizabeth Blackburn  
Joseph DeRisi  
David Eisenberg  
Gerald R. Fink  
Lee Hartwell  
David Hirsh  
Cynthia Kenyon  
Chaitan Khosla  
Marc Kirschner  
Sharon Long  
Douglas A. Melton  
Erin O'Shea  
David A. Relman  
Barbara Wold  
Richard Young

Here's the revised letter:

Dear colleagues:

Thank you for signing the open letter in support of unrestricted access to the published record of scientific research. More than two hundred scientists have now signed this letter, pledging that their voluntary support of scholarly journals will be limited to journals that make the primary research reports that they have published freely available for distribution and use by independent online public libraries, within six months after publication. (a complete list of signatures can be found at: <http://www.publiclibraryofscience.org>)

We are now writing to ask you to join a small "leadership group" of active proponents of this initiative, who will act as public spokespersons in informing the wider scientific community and the public about the initiative and who will actively engage their scientific societies and the editors and publishers of scientific journals to advocate the policy proposed in the open letter.

So far, this initiative has been a small, informally organized, grassroots effort with no budget and no administrative support. The next stage ---rallying broad support from the research community and the public, and working constructively with the scientific journals and societies--- will take more work than just a few of us can manage by ourselves. More importantly, your leadership will be vital in helping us to win broader support from the scientific community. Please let us know as soon as possible whether you would be willing to devote some of your time to helping with this initiative by serving as a member of the proposed "leadership group." We will then get back to you to discuss specific actions.

Sincerely,

Patrick O. Brown  
Department of Biochemistry,  
Stanford University School of Medicine and HHMI

Harold E. Varmus  
President  
Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

**APPENDIX:**

**RESPONSES TO SOME FREQUENTLY RAISED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INITIATIVE**

1) Some people say they are hesitant to sign because they view the pledge as an effort to boycott biomedical journals, including some of the most prestigious. Some journals have also used the portrayal of our efforts as an unjustifiably hostile boycott.

We view the pledge as a strong positive statement of support for journals that are willing to make their articles freely accessible, rather than a boycott of those that do not. The letter explicitly defines standards that many scientists feel should be met by journals that seek their voluntary support in the form of submission or review of manuscripts, editorial work, or subscription. By giving a single voice to many scientists, the letter makes it easier for journals to understand the practical advantages of adopting the policy that the letter advocates. It is true that the effort we have undertaken could place journals that do not comply at significant risk - and we hope that they will recognize and weigh this risk. No institution that asks for our money and voluntary contributions of work and intellectual property has a right to take these for granted. We have allowed for nearly a year of constructive discussion before initiating any actions to give the journals plenty of time to consider this proposal and find ways to succeed with it.

2) Several journals have maintained that there is no need for our proposal because they are already providing their content via HighWire Press or via their own web site. A few of these journals make their content available without subscription or license fees at some time after publication, and believe they have already conformed with the goals of the initiative.

It is crucial to understand an important difference between material that is freely accessible, on a controlled basis, one paper at a time, at a journal's web site and material that is freely accessible in a single comprehensive collection. The latter can be efficiently searched in a single search of the archival literature, the former cannot. (Imagine how much less useful DNA sequences would be if instead of Genbank and other global repositories we dozens of smaller collections of sequences each of which could only be accessed one at a time through a genome center's website). Large scale searching is obviously one of the most important benefits of Internet accessibility, but other possibilities, including extensive interlinking between reports originally published in diverse journals, will also require the ability to search freely within one comprehensive archive. The online public libraries that we are advocating can easily coexist with the publishers' own online journal sites, and with HighWire Press.

3) Some journals and editors have been concerned about relinquishing "control" of published reports when materials are placed in the public repository.

We have difficulty understanding what significant risks are attached to lack of enforcement of copyrights six months after publication of articles in our field. At that point, reprinting of any articles, even in books that make a profit for a publisher, can hardly be viewed as damaging by authors who seek wide distribution of their work. But we all know that such reprinting and profit-making is exceedingly rare, especially in a digital world. And there is a deeper issue: should we continue to support journals that seek to own as private property the formal reports of the results of scientific research, much of which was conducted at public expense, representing the hard

work and original ideas of others, and for which neither authors nor funders seek compensation?

**4) Some readers have misread this letter as promoting PubMedCentral (PMC) as the sole repository of accessible articles.**

This was never a stated or unstated intent. In fact, it is highly desirable that the information be accessible and searchable at multiple sites, in the United States and abroad. The example of PMC as a public repository of biomedical research reports was offered because the important role and excellent performance of PubMed are widely appreciated and PMC, linked to PubMed, is the only site we know of that already has the desired characteristics.

**5) Some have argued that PMC is not working and that the idea of making it a large, fully searchable archive is quixotic.**

Although there were some early technical problems in the first months of operation of PMC (surely not an unexpected situation), it is now working well. Its current content is small, not for lack of technical capacity, but because relatively few journals (fewer than twenty) have thus far agreed to provide their content. PMC is operated by NCBI, the same organization that has successfully operated PubMed and Genbank, arguably the two most successful and important online resources in the life sciences. Its parent organization, the NLM, is the World's most comprehensive archive of biomedical literature. The staff of PMC is confident that very large volumes of articles can be stored and searched at the site. And, of course, this initiative promotes development of other independent online libraries of scientific research.

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